

3-11-1973

Interview of Dorothy Unger

Dorothy Unger

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/missions-history>

Recommended Citation

Unger, D. (1973). Interview of Dorothy Unger. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/missions-history/48>

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at Scholar Works at Harding. It has been accepted for inclusion in Living History of Missions by an authorized administrator of Scholar Works at Harding. For more information, please contact scholarworks@harding.edu.



HARDING COLLEGE HISTORY OF LIVING MISSIONS

Interview of Dorothy Unger by Van Tate

Tate: This is Van Tate with Dorothy Unger on the 11th of March. We want to interview you, Dorothy, for our Living History Library. Dorothy, it is good to have you with us, and I have a series of questions that I want to ask you. You can just respond to those regarding your work in Portugal. First of all, we would like to get a brief historical outline of the work in Portugal.

Unger: The work was started as a result of a marine corp officer, who was stationed at the American embassy in Lisbon, making an appeal to the brotherhood in the United States for someone to come and start the work in Portugal. The couple who went to Portugal, the Arlie Smiths', has been in Brazil since 1956, or thereabout, and, of course, Portuguese was spoken in Brazil, and a couple like this was perfect to go and start the work in Portugal. The Smiths went in April of 1959. Since they knew the language, they were able to perhaps get the work on a good ground faster, much faster, than a person who did not know the language, no matter how organized that person might be. They were joined by the Willford Burgess family the following year. Brother Burgess did not know the language, nor did his wife, and so they had a period of study, and Brother Burgess worked very hard, especially the first year, on the language. The next couple that arrived was the Leon Clamores, who had done missionary work in Africa for a number of years and wanted to go into the Portuguese profession of Mozambique in Africa, but the government requires that you spend a year in Portugal studying the language before you even considered the possibility of going into one of the Portuguese territories of Africa. The Clamores were never permitted to go to Mozambique. I don't know the reason, except the Portuguese government did have a difficult time with many missionaries in Angola, or Mozambique, preaching politics instead of religion, or mixing the two, and, actually, some of the denominational missionaries, as I understood it, did stir up some of the troubles with the terrorist in Angola and were sent out of the country. Then, in August of 1971, the Johnson family from Michigan, a couple with three children, arrived as I did. Then, a year following, two young men arrived to help with the work. There was also one other couple that joined the missionaries to help with the work. They were there for about three months, but returned within that time. At this present time, the Johnson family is still in Portugal, and one single man named Robert Reed, from Abilene, Texas, is there. Of course, I plan to continue my work there when I return in April.

Tate: Could you give us just a little bit of background of the people, the culture and the religion that the people have?

Unger: Yes, the country is known as a Catholic country. In a large part, this is traditional, and many people are baptized or christened when they are born. They get married in the Catholic church, and a priest performs their funeral service. There are a lot of people who are not married in the Catholic church. They have a civil ceremony which enables them to be able to get a divorce if they want. The lower classes seem to be very receptive to this truth where the middle and upper-middle classes lean a little more traditionally to the church. I have read, and have been told, that the Catholic church has been strengthened somewhat within the last few years because of Fatima, which is a place in Portugal where three little girls said that they had seen the virgin Mary. There are annual pilgrimages there, and this has appealed a lot to the upper classes for some reason; more so than the poorer classes. I would say that as far as our problems are concerned, we teach more of the people who have been taught by the denominations,

and we haven't really had a problem with the Catholic church, nor have we had a problem with the government. But we do have a problem with Pentecostals and Jehovah Witnesses and how we are involved in this problem, in one sense, is that people will say, or call someone "brother" or "sister", will say, "It's the same Bible." We are having this particular problem because we are working with the poorer people who have been influenced by the denominations. Some of them can't read or write, and when they get to the denomination, and they see the preacher using the Bible, and then they see the Christian using the Bible, they say it is still the same Bible since they can't study it themselves. They really believe this.

Tate: What is the strength of the church of Christ in Portugal? In other words, about how many congregations do we have?

Unger: There are four very small congregations in Portugal.

Tate: And where are they located?

Unger: There's a congregation in Lisbon which is the capital of Portugal.

Tate: Is that where the work all started?

Unger: Yes, then there is a congregation in Porto, the second largest city, and that is the most recent congregation established. Then there are two small congregations in little towns. There is one in the place where I live, Posedarchus, and then there is another one in a resort town on the ocean. All of these congregations are small. The Lisbon congregation is the largest.

Tate: About how many members are in each congregation?

Unger: It's difficult, I've forgotten just how many people have been baptized and are active in the Lisbon congregation, but the last time I was able to attend services there, there were 34 people present, and we're thankful that this congregation has a youthful look about it. We think that there is a great potential for growth there.

Tate: Are any of the people meeting in any church buildings that they own, or where do they meet?

Unger: There are three rented buildings, and the fourth congregation meets in my home.

Tate: Do you have any unusual aspects of the work, and special problems that you face that you would like to talk about?

Unger: Well, the main problem, I think, is the "same Bible" concept. Again we do not have problems with the government at this time. We also have to stress, each time we have a new person come to a worship service or Bible study in my home, that we are not Jehovah's Witnesses. The government does not approve of Jehovah's Witnesses. I don't know all of the reasons, but one of the reasons is that they won't salute the flag, and they are not allowed to rent buildings or own property. They do meet in homes, and since this is their pattern, and the people are afraid, they do ask. We have to tell them over and over that we are not Jehovah's Witnesses. We even have this problem when we make hospital visits and start to hand out literature. People will say that we are Jehovah's Witnesses, and we will say, "No we are not", and we will show them the address and everything of the church and where it says "Church of Christ".

Tate: What most effective methods have you used to reach the people?

Unger: The Bible Correspondence Course. This has been a real value, and this is how the congregations started where I live. We took the names of fourteen people who lived on the train line on which I live, it runs through some of the Lisbon suburbs, and we wrote all of those people who had completed the Bible Correspondence Course and asked them to come to a Bible Study. The response was good and before we knew it, we had started a worship service. We started with three members, a Portuguese preacher, myself and a lady. A year later, we had ten members for which we are all very thankful. They are all wonderful people, and their faith is great. They are off on some things, but on the whole, they have accepted the truth, and their faith is so great that it really is encouraging. They are older, but they feel that they have been neighbors for 20-25 years and they know that if they remain faithful, they're going to continue in heaven as friends and neighbors. This is very encouraging to all of the missionaries, the few of us that there are.

Tate: Now, what about your own personal work. What have you yourself done in teaching the people?

Unger: I felt, when I went there, that as far as I could see, there was no reason why a woman couldn't do in Portugal what she was doing in the United States, and that is what I am doing. I'm teaching women, and children as much as I can. I make hospital visits. I make phone calls. We visit a nursing home when we can. I'm just trying to do there what I would do in the United States and whatever else I can see that can be done.

Tate: What would you like to say to the students who would be interested in going to Portugal to prepare them for the work there?

Unger: I'd like to direct this especially to women, but some of these remarks would be meant for all. I think that preparation is so important. A business corporation would not think of sending a man abroad unless they had given him some type of training or unless it was some kind of an emergency, and then they would choose a very competent person. I think this is what the church does sometimes, or what the church doesn't do I mean, is send people who are not prepared. I would get as much Bible training as I could, I would attend Mission Seminars, and I would try to study Mission methods and especially the book of Acts. The best preparation I had was studying the book of Acts. If possible, I would study the language ahead of time. This might not be possible, because there are some languages that are not taught very many places in the United States, and some of them, I am sure, are not taught at all. I would also, whether it is a single woman or a married woman, try to prepare myself for a vocation. This would enable a married woman to help her husband more in that she would have had some training which would help her organize her thoughts more decently and in good order on the field. I would also try to get some kind of work experience, even if it were just summers, or working in an office, or for a couple of years, because again, this would help a person to be better organized in what they had to do. Most important of all, perhaps, is this would help a person gain more experience in helping people. The single woman needs to concentrate on being independent; not the type of independence that would cause her to want to usurp authority, but the type of independence that would keep her from being a "clinger" on the field. I doubt if she would be very welcomed on most fields if she is a "clinger." By this I mean that I would even advise that a person not live with a missionary family unless she absolutely had to.

Tate: And that only for a brief time.

Unger: In fact, I don't even think it is a good idea at all. Through this, the single person, male or female, or the married person, through all of this, they will gain a greater relationship with God than they ever dreamed possible. At least, that is my personal feeling. You have to stand alone with God. I talked with brother Johnson about this. Brother Johnson has a happy marriage, and I'm not saying anything against the marriage, but on the mission field, you just have to stand alone with God at times. This is awe inspiring. It is overwhelming, and much of the time you feel like that little child that Jesus talked about.

Tate: For a married woman on the mission field, what should her priority be? The work or her family?

Unger: Her family. Even as an old maid, I would say the family. I think some married women, at first, have the idea, the romantic idea, and I think all of us have this idea a little bit, of going and taking the word across the world, and this is all right too, but for a married woman, her family is going to need so much attention. I know one little girl who cried every morning for two months because she couldn't speak the language and she was going to a Portuguese school. This was hard on the parents. The husband has to work so hard, and sometimes he's away, and when he comes home, he needs to have the security of having that home functioning well. He needs to have good meals so that he won't have the continuous stomach problems that so many of us have.

Tate: Changing the subject, I'd like to know if any of the national preachers in Portugal have been supported by Americans and if they have, what is your evaluation of it.

Unger: There is one preacher at the present time on a full-time salary. This man is doing a good job. He was doing a good job before he was on salary. He actually had organized and started a congregation in his home. I think this man would continue to preach the gospel whether he was being paid or not. We have differences of opinion as to whether he should have been started. I was against it, but I kept those thoughts to myself which I think is good for all women to do. He is doing a good job, and then we have a young man who worked for a long time without any salary whatsoever and spent his own money. I think it was his inheritance from his father, and he spent most of that money, and it was quite a sum, to prepare himself to go to Africa to be a missionary. He is in Mosambique now. He was paid some before he left, and I think he should have been, but it wasn't much, I think a hundred dollars a month, which in Portugal really isn't much for a person who is supposed to be a professional person. They consider a preacher as a professional person. There is one preacher who is receiving a part-time salary. I was against this under the circumstances, but that is just my opinion, and again we need to think about what is scriptural and what is opinion, and I am not the one who is doing the paying. I was for his expenses being paid and so were the people, and actually they are paying him: this little congregation of ten members, we have sometimes 13-16 people present but there are ten members. They are very poor people but they are paying him 35 _____ per Sunday, and that is a little over a dollar, about a dollar and a half, I think. That just pays for his transportation. One of the missionaries is paying him about \$40 a month in addition. Now I'll tell you what I am doing as far as he is concerned, because I am working with him each Sunday. I am trying to provide him with materials on the Bible in Portuguese. He thirsts for this material and I always buy in the book that this is from such and such a congregation in the United States, which happens to be one in Florida.

Tate: Okay, Dorothy, what about the economic situation in Portugal at this point.

Right now we are undergoing some tremendous changes, economically, all over the world, and so what we say today may not be too valid day after tomorrow. But, what kind of salary will be necessary for one going at this point. What will he expect to pay for rent or general living conditions?

Unger: As you say, the economic situation is changing. Whatever a person would need in any country, they need more than that. I say this because I went to Portugal with the idea that I didn't go there to make money, and this is all well and good, and I still am not planning to go back with the idea of getting a big salary. At the same time, that will be just one more thing that you will have to worry about, and you need to cut out all the worries that you can, and one of them is the financial security. When the dollar drops and the cost of living goes up and you have just enough to get by, you are going to be squeezed financially. If you get sick, this is going to worry you, so you need to have enough. Now, I went to Portugal with \$300 per month. I thought that was not enough, and I think that my elders thought that was not enough, but I had confidence in my elders and I knew if I gave them a good report, I wouldn't even have to ask for more. Now, I'm fortunate in this way, and I have not asked for more, but when I give them a report, they see my needs and they increase it, and they have made up for the dollar each time. It's taken them awhile because they have so many other things to do and I know they just can't think about me all of the time. When I was sick this past winter, they sent extra money for doctor bills, and my friends did too. I would say, really, that a single person in Portugal who plans to stay there any length of time, should have or start off with at least \$400 a month, maybe a little more because of language study.

Tate: What about a married couple?

Unger: A married couple, with three children, I would say, and this isn't counting working fund or anything else, just on arrival, I would say at least \$600 per month. Acutally, I do not know what the married couple is making in Portugal. I know what they went there with, and I know that the dollar situation has really been hard on them because their elders were in a position where they could not make up for the dollar.

Tate: Now this would not be including house rent and things like that.

Unger: Yes, that would be including house rent, but most missionaries have a working fund where at first they can, well, they need to have a good working fund to start with and I think the home congregation or supporting congregation needs to realize that the missionary needs to experiment a little, and he doesn't need to have to go out and start all kinds of programs without really knowing what he is doing in order to spend that money and continue to get it. This has happened to a lot of missionaries. They should give him a period of time, six months to a year, to really know, I think, and a single person too. My elders gave me this. I have been richly blessed with the elders I have.

Tate: Where do you get your support?

Unger: My support comes from the Franklin Road congregation in Indianapolis. This was my home congregation.

Tate: Do they support you fully or do they receive funds from others.

Unger: They receive funds from other congregations, but I have not had to worry any about raising funds. As a woman, they did not want me to have to do this. You see, they are friends of mine too, many people in the congregation are, and they have helped

prepare me. They helped me while I was finishing school at Harding. They helped me \$75 per month while I was finishing school here the last two years. Right from the start, they got another congregation to help because they were paying off their building and their regular expenses and they got the support, I did not have to. The third congregation that helps me came about in this way. I just happened to write a very good friend of mine, in fact, the person who taught me, that I was wanting to buy some supplies and things. Well, she talked to the elders there and before I knew it they were sending money through Franklin Road as I requested as I don't believe in hiding funds. My finances have worked out pretty well, and that doesn't mean that I haven't had some really rough times financially when the dollar dropped and the cost of living was going up, and then I was sick. I'm not saying that I haven't had my own problems. I've had enough problems to know that I need to have enough money so that won't be one of my worries.

Tate: I think that is very wise. If the person's supporting church is, what we say, on the ball, they will be sensitive to this and they will provide. Unfortunately, not all the congregations are that way and that sensitive. Some of our people have really suffered very much and it is unfortunate. Well, Dorothy, can you think of any other areas that you would like to discuss before we conclude our interview sheet. If you have anything else that you would like to add, I'd be more than happy to keep that in mind.

Unger: One thing, is the persons faith when they go. Now I know that Harding took a survey of reasons why people go to the mission field, and I've been asked by many prospective missionaries and many missionaries, why I went to the mission field, and I think that a person should be able to answer. This is my opinion, but I feel that a person should be able to answer, I became a Christian, you are supposed to teach others and then go wherever, if it is just next door, but you are supposed to teach others. I think if every missionary or every Christian loves God and his son with all their heart and soul, there would be no reason for asking the question, "Why did you go?" Or, even asking yourself, "Why did I go?" Faith is very important. Another thing is love. Now in Henry Drummond's sermon, he mentions this and he says something like this, "And you would-be missionaries, if you go without love....if you can't show love, you better practice on showing love." I think in most people, the love is there, but they haven't been able to show it in ways that we commonly accept. If you don't love those people there, where you go, they are going to know it, and I'll tell you, if you love them, then they will love you. Another thing is the preparation part, I left one thing out. I think, when you do decide where you are going, you should read all you can about that country, and, if possible, make a trip in advance. But you should read all you can about the country. Sometimes we don't listen to advice from our parents, but I did listen to advice from my father, who lived for almost 30 years in Europe and the Far East, and what he told me has really helped me. One thing was don't fight the culture or any part of it, and I'll add, unless something is unscriptural. When it is unscriptural--use the Bible, your sword. I might say too that, my Bible is my sword in public and my security in private. Another point, if you continue to think that everything should be changed like the United States, then you should go home. Another important thing is keeping your good sense of humor on the field. I don't care what part of the world it is, the culture is going to be different. Don't eat anything you can't cook, wash or peel, even in the United States. Another important thing for any American, and I think Americans are such generous people on the whole, if you are just traveling abroad and visiting any field, or going there to live, don't give money away. Consider carefully, as you should in the United States, how it is best to help people.

Tate: What are your own plans now. You are here in the states for a few months and

will be going back over there?

Unger: Actually, I'm here for a few weeks. I chose to come home for about forty days. I guess like forty days and forty nights. For my purposes, I feel like this was the right length of time. I may change my mind about this, and the next time I may come home for a longer period. Right now, I'm trying to search through materials that I can translate easily into Portuguese. We need materials desperately. My language teacher said that I do have the makings of a good translator, and I would like to work on this part of it. As far as my work in Portugal is concerned, my first goal is to teach the word of God, whether that is women and children directly, or whether it is translating materials. I want to do both because I think that teaching will help me in translating, because I will learn more and more what they like and how to approach them. One of our biggest problems is providing materials for the preachers and giving them proper training. We have no preacher training school at the time. Arlie Smith did have a class for the preachers.

Tate: Thank you very much Dorothy. We appreciate your taking this time out to share some of these thoughts with us. I'm sure they will be of great benefit to our students.